

## **Droughty Apulia and Water Magicians**

Clara Copeta\*

### **Abstract**

In all the countries of the Mediterranean basin, in the past and sometimes even to-day, the chronic draught of water has given birth, to the great consideration of those individuals who were endowed with a great sensibility which allowed them to discover the presence of water even at great depth: water-diviners.

This paper presents two examples of water-diviners ability belonging to the past; the former happened in the 1908 in Bari, the latter- a more recent one- regarding Mr. Pierino Locapo, a shaman who lived in Altamura area. He died some years ago. Moreover the paper contains an interview to a water-diviner of Altamura zone, who, although occasionally still to-day, practices this activity.

**Keywords:** Drought of water – water-diviners – sensibility – favourable social context.

### **1.Introduction**

The poor rainfalls in the Mediterranean area has rendered fundamental as well as sacred water so that, as A. Buttimer (1986) affirms Mediterranean countries have become the cradle of water symbolism (p. 185). Not only does she variety of symbols diversify with the change of dominant thought in the different historic epochs (such as the medieval period a Renaissance) but for the Christian World their relevance has transformed water in a medium for mainly religious ceremonies (for ex. Baptism) in this case water already indispensable for the

---

\* Associate Professor, Dipartimento SAGEO, Università degli Studi “Aldo Moro” di Bari.

life of men, becomes means of religious birth.

In all the countries of Mediterranean basin, the scarcity of water also made this sacredness be transferred (so to say) to those people who were able thanks to their “sensibility” to enter in contact with water, in the sense that they were able to detect its presence even at a distance: water-diviners.

This happened in the past, now in contemporary world which is usually defined as post-modern, pre-modern elements still survive such as the practice to turn to men endowed with those peculiar qualities useful to spot aquifers.

This need of water in our district is due to the fact that here very few surface waters are present or one hand to the calcareous nature of the land, on the other to poor rainfalls (on average 500-700 mm a year).

As a consequence, for this reason the problem of finding water resources in the underground has always existed; water would be employed both for civil use and irrigation.

As this was and sometimes is the need, the remedies are two: either addressing prayers to God, for example:

### *Ad petendam pluviam*

#### *Oratio*

Deus, in quo vivimus, movémur, et sumus:  
plúviam nobis tríbue congruéntem; ut,  
præséntibus subsidiis sufficiéntem adjúti,  
sempitérna fiduciálius appetámus. Per  
Dóminum.

#### Secreta

Oblátis, quæsumus, Dómine, placáre  
munéribus: et oportúnum nobis tríbue  
plúviæ sufficiéntis auxiliun. Per Dóminum.

#### Postcommunio

Da nobis, quæsumus, Dómine, plúviam  
salutárem: et áridam terræ fáciem fluéntis  
cælestibus dignánte infúnde. Per Dóminum.

or turning to water-diviners who detect the place where to dig a well and so find water.

## 2. Water-diviners in the past

I would like to stop for a moment in order to outline the figure of a water-diviner who is a man who is able to spot water according to the meaning I give to his faculty.

In past rural areas and until a few decades ago, as geological maps did not exist, the figure of water-diviners had a “great relevance, and for this reason they were welcomed by their communities.

Their quality and personality were never doubted and they were considered always successful. Now the question is: How it is possible to explain their ability?

Some anthropologists suggested an interpretation of magic phenomena (De Martino, 1959, Mauss, 1991) but they did not concern water-diviners. On the contrary - it is my opinion - that water-diviners do not belong to this category rather it seems to me that they are human beings who facilitated by favourable social context, were able to preserve along with their rationality, pre-rational form which is based on their senses.

This kind of knowledge may be interpreted as sensibility, quality, and ability.

In this short paper I start presenting an event happened in 1908 in Bari, than I will take into consideration in the evidence of a well-known visionary shaman.

Later on I will make reference to short interviews to water-diviners who are still active to-day.

*1st event: Bari unusual drought in 1908 (Historical Archive of Bari district envelope 2018, folder 21)*

- a) 1908 is a year a serious droughty in Bari, rendered more relevant by the fact that it was preceded by a little rainy fall (1907). The reservoirs are almost empty and the inhabitants

suffer for this serious shortage of water. The Government Administrations try to mitigate these hardships making water supply ships arrive at Bari port.

These water-supply ships come from Naples, Corfù, Ancona. Also special trains are employed to help Bari population. Nevertheless water is still not enough; the inhabitants protest insistently, they ask for the discovery subterranean water.

The mayor move by this protest and the real need of water, decide to consult the Chiabrera brothers, who are famous water-diviners. When the Cabrera brothers arrive, they research accurately the territory identify the little garden before Ateneo as the place where abundant and the best quality water could be found in the underground.

Excavations are made by means of an ultra modern excavator arrived for the purpose in Bari (the excavator is a product of the viennese firm Abert Franck & Co, Express type, endowed with a steam engine). At last water is found, but unfortunately it is a salt water. The inhabitants complain because they think that the excavations have not been done properly.

The remonstrance spreads to the other town of the district...

- b) These events involve also the executive members of the Ministry of Agriculture, Industries and Commerce who write a report on this subject which is distributed in the different countries of Bari district. (see State Archive of Bari, Historic Archive of Modugno, envelope 408, folder n.1). Report on "Research of drinkable water in Apulia". Because of the drought every municipal district has asked its own well in the ground in the hope to find drinkable water. This situation is very complex for the presence of water-diviners who think they can "identify" the existence of water even at a deep level. These men are called by municipal administrations and private citizens, and claim to have found water in many places of the underground. As a consequence many people ask for a drill, but this implies a considerable

cost which the Ministry cannot afford.

The Local newspaper is against this “self-conceited bureaucratic science” but the Ministry does not change its opinion, it denies the presence of water-diviners.

Taking into consideration the difficult conditions of Apulian people, the Government Administration provides for the renewal of the transportation of water by means of water-supply ships.

Moreover it provides for plans for the future, which are: to lay a piping system along the railway line in order to dispense along the route of the trains the water taken from Ofantino river.

Furthermore a hydrological research of Apulian territory in order to verify the presence of subterranean water is promoted.

Epilogue:

2005: in the little garden at the back of Ateneo excavations are made in order to obtain an underground parking area. The works are interrupted for three years as in the underground an aquifer existed but.... Memory of events is short.

*1st story: The shaman of Altamura*

Pierino Locapo, (born in '22) is speleologist, amateur archaeologist and water-diviner (after attending the school of Divining). Combining searching the territory inch by inch he collected relics, tools, furniture, almost disappeared objects with which he set up a rural Museum, today Ethnographic Museum of Alta Murgia (1987).

He was very successful as water-diviner. He identified even at the depth of 480 m. groundwater levels and springs. He was also able to define the water flow.

As far as archaeological researches are concerned Pierino (the wolf of Murgia) was able to identify prehistoric settlements, Peucetian tombs and roman ruins.

He worked with Usa archaeologist, Prof. Perkins. It is in this field that Pierino showed his ability as clairvoyant: he located two

tombs with other archaeologists. Having examined the relics of the first tomb, which had been already opened, he suffered a sudden which obliged him to lay in his bed. The following day, from his bed, Pierino, the shaman, described in details the relics that the others archaeologists would find in the second tomb “it is the face of a young man, in clay, pink and white coloured which has on the top a vase (a Cantharis) with red figures”.

It was a really so.... A vision had revealed it to him.

This was not the only vision he had in his life.

### 3. Water-diviners today

Why we still talk about water-diviners today? The interviewed farmers have answered me that through the diviners they could reduce the costs of excavation....

And so, we have interviewed two water-diviners:

a) Salvatore Moramarco, aged 45, workman, amateur water-diviner, that is only when friend ask him. Here it is what he told me: *Well, when one talks about water-divining, one cannot talk of a true job but of something which is subject to remuneration or that one does to please someone even without a reward.*

*I was almost thirty when observing an old man from Santeramo, who had come in our farm to identify the eventual presence of water, I decided to “try” the experience, actually in the some places where the old man had ascertained the presence of water, me too “felt” the same vibration, it was a research “in reserve order”. I started then and since that moment I have almost always found spring of water.*

*The tools, a water-diviner may use are different: a staple of metal (frequently copper), of wood (the so-called “vignolo” of olive wood) or the pendulum. The research starts limiting the territory walking along the perimeter of the field. Since that moment I am able to feel the presence of water. In effect sometimes it happens that having given a negative opinion, the man who gave me the task insists on going on with the research. So I start walking inside the perimeter. It is very rare to find the spring in the inside of the field when the perimetric results have been negative.*

*In case I am able to identify the presence of the spring, the result is impressive: the extremities of the staple (vignolo) start to vibrate, and the vibration are related to the quantity of underground water. Moreover the extremities turn reward me. Both for me and both for those who are near me, the seen is shocking. According to the vibration I am able to understand and tell the course of the water or if it is that case of a "canal".*

*It has happened that I felt the presence of water even though under my feet there was a compact stratum of calcareous stone many meters deep.*

*From my experience I may affirm I never "felt" water at the depth of more than 20 meters.*

*However I prefer to work in the warmest months of the year, in Summer the soil is arid and may be possible to identify the presence of water more easily.*

*I say "might" because I never tried to work in different period of year or when it has rained or in a wet soil.*

*Generally I work in Altamura zone in the direction of Matera, in Marinella land, in the part of Carpentino road, in the direction of Laterza, and in a country called "La Putta", or along "Selva" road.*

Are you now still working as water-diviner?

*I have almost abandoned this job since when I went to work in the North (of Italy) in building sites. Now partly for lack of time, partly because it happened that some people have no faith in what I said, I almost abandoned this activity. I only satisfy the requests of persons that I know.*

*In some moments I fear people lose the confidence in me and I would not like to become a "freak". I use my ability only to find water. Some advised me to study in depth this subject but conscious I could come in contact with other subjects which are out of my competence such as esoterism I preferred to leave it out.*

*I would like to know more and to start exhausted studies concerning my "ability" to find water.*

*My greatest satisfaction is to intensify this capacity and offer my "natural gift" to others.*

(October 2010)

b) The latter amateur water-diviner is Michele Caputo from Mola (of Bari). He is 65. He told me to have realized he has this

“ability” when he was 10. Still now he is working for friends and people he knows.

He let me film him to show his “sensibility” to water.

(August 2010)

#### 4. Conclusion

I would like to conclude with a final consideration. As already said thanks to the rural cultural context that still existed, in the South of Italy, people trusted in the sensibility of these water-diviner and they have kept it, it may be defined as a mirror game, when the cultural contest changes (see the interview to Mr. Moramarco) the water-diviner himself loses his faith in his ability as he fears not to be believed and to become a “freak”. A new contest different from his own causes in him what we might define as “a Merlin syndrome”, the lastly still living magician with powers that become more and more fading. An old world which comes to its end and new worlds which start.

My interpretation which is based on the true contemporary interviews might be extended also to the whole world of water-diviners.

#### References

- Buttimer A. (1986), *Natura, simboli dell'acqua e l'umana ricerca della totalità*, in Dardel E., *L'Uomo e la terra* (ed) Copeta C., Edizioni Unicopli, Milano;
- Cicirelli A. (2007/2008), “*Il Museo Etnografico dell'Alta Murgia di Altamura: da collezione privata ad istituzione pubblica*” in *Altamura* n°48/49, Edizioni di Pagine, pagg. 89-136;
- Copeta C. (2002) , *Le rôle de l'analyse du paysage dans l'approche locale*, in Borri D., Camarda D. e Grassini L. (eds), *Planification durable pour le sol et l'eau dans la Méditerranée*, Rorini, L'Harmattan Italia, pp. 355-368 ;



- Copeta C. (1997) *Post-modern suggestions*, Athens International Conference Urban Regional Environmental Planning, Atene, pp. 368-380;
- Copeta C. (1992), *La beauté et l'ordre en géographie*, in L. Mondada, F. Panese, O. Sönderström (a cura di), *Paysage et Lisibilité*, Université de Lausanne, Institut de Géographie, pp. 57-64 ;
- De Martino E. (1959), *Sud e Magia*, Feltrinelli, Milano;
- Durkheim E., Hubert H., Mauss M. (1991), *Le origini dei poteri magici*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino;
- Maciotti M.I., (2000), *Pellegrinaggi e giubilei. I luoghi del culto*, Editori Laterza, Roma;
- Raffestin C. (2005), *Dalla nostalgia del territorio al desiderio di paesaggio. Elementi per una teoria del paesaggio*, Alinea Editrice, Firenze;
- Raffestin C. (1986), *Punti di riferimento per una teoria della territorialità umana*, in (a cura di) Copeta C. , *Esistere e Abitare*, Milano, Angeli;
- Raffestin C.( 1984), *Territoriality. A Reflection of the Discrepancies between the Organization of Space and Individual Liberty*, in *Cahiers Géographie di Québec*, Vol. 26. pp. 185-198;
- State Archive of Bari , Historical Archive of Bari district, envelope 2018, folder 21;
- State Archive of Bari, Historical Archive of Modugno, envelope 408, folder n.1;
- Tragni B., “Quel lupo della Murgia fiuta l’acqua”, in *La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno*, Settembre 1982.